

THE SUICIDE CLUB

NEW ARABIAN NIGHTS TALE
OF MYSTERY AND ADVENTURE

By ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON

SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS.

Amongst friends, Prince Florizel of Bohemia and his confidant and Master of Hare, Col. Geraldine, set out one night in London in search of adventure. They are in an open bar when a young man, followed by two companions, enters the bar. The young man, who is a member of the Suicide Club, tells them of his recent escape from a madhouse, and of his determination to join the club. The Prince and Col. Geraldine are intrigued by the story, and decide to investigate. They follow the young man to a small, dark room, where they find a large, ornate mirror. The Prince and Col. Geraldine are intrigued by the story, and decide to investigate. They follow the young man to a small, dark room, where they find a large, ornate mirror. The Prince and Col. Geraldine are intrigued by the story, and decide to investigate. They follow the young man to a small, dark room, where they find a large, ornate mirror.

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The House of Mystery.

That of Mr. Morris, replied the other, with a prodigious display of confusion, which had been visibly growing upon him throughout the last few words.

"Mr. John or Mr. James Morris?" inquired the host.

"I really cannot tell you," returned the unfortunate guest. "I am not personally acquainted with the gentleman any more than I am with yourself."

"I see," said Mr. Morris, "there is another person of the same name further down the street, and I have no doubt the policeman will be able to supply you with his number. Believe me, I felicitate myself on the misunderstanding which has procured me the pleasure of your company for so long, and let me express the hope that we may meet again upon a more regular footing. Meantime I would not for the world detain you longer from your friends. John," he added, raising his voice, "will you see that this gentleman finds his great coat?"

And with the most agreeable air Mr. Morris escorted his visitor as far as the ante-room door, where he left him under conduct of the butler. As he passed the window on his return to the drawing-room Brackenbury could hear him utter a profound sigh, as though his mind was laden with a great anxiety and his nerves already fatigued with the task on which he was engaged.

For perhaps an hour the hansom kept arriving with such frequency that Mr. Morris had to receive a new guest for every old one that he sent away, and the company preserved its number undiminished. But toward the end of that time the arrivals

grew few and far between, and at length ceased entirely, while the process of elimination was continued with unimpaired activity. The drawing-room began to look empty; the hansom was discontinued for lack of a banker; more than one person said good-night of his own accord, and was suffered to depart without expostulation, and in the meanwhile Mr. Morris redoubled his agreeable attentions to those who stayed behind. He went from group to group and from person to person with looks of the readiest sympathy, and the most pertinent and pleasing talk; he was not so much like a host as a hostess, and there was a feminine coquetry and condescension in his manner which charmed the hearts of all.

As the guests grew thinner Lieut. Rich strolled for a moment out of the drawing-room into the hall in quest of fresher air. But he had no sooner passed the threshold of the ante-chamber than he was brought to a dead halt by a discovery of the most surprising nature. The flowering shrubs had disappeared from the staircase; three large furniture wagons stood before the garden gate; the servants were busy dismantling the house upon all sides, and some of them had already donned their great coats and were preparing to depart. It was like the end of a country ball, where everything has been supplied by contract. Brackenbury had indeed some matter for reflection. First, the guests, who were no real guests after all, had been dismissed, and now the servants, who could hardly be genuine servants, were actively dispersing.

"What the whole establishment is sham?" he asked himself. "The mushroom of a single night which should disappear before morning?" Watching a favorable opportunity, Brackenbury dashed upstairs to the higher regions of the house. It was as he had expected. He ran from room to room, and saw not a stick of furniture nor so much as a picture on the walls. Although the house had been painted and papered, it was not only uninhabited at present, but plainly had never been inhabited at all. The young officer remembered with astonishment its spacious, settling and hospitable air on his arrival. It was only at a prodigious cost that the imposture could have been carried out upon so great a scale.

Who Was the Host?

Who, then, was Mr. Morris? What was his intention in thus playing the household-er for a single night in the remote west of London? Brackenbury remembered that he had already delayed too long, and hastened to join the company. Many had left during his absence; and, counting the lieutenant and his host, there were not more than five persons in the drawing-room—recently so thronged. Mr. Morris greeted him, as he re-entered the apartment, with a smile, and immediately rose to his feet.

"It is now time, gentlemen," said he, "to explain my purpose in decoying you from your amusements. I trust you did not find the evening hang very dully on your hands; but my object, I will confess it, was not to entertain your leisure, but to help myself in an unfortunate necessity. You are all gentlemen, he continued, "your appearance does you that much justice, and I ask for no better security. Hence I speak without concealment: I ask you to render me a dangerous and delicate service; dangerous because you may run the hazard of your lives, and delicate, because I must ask an absolute discretion upon all that you shall see or hear. From an utter stranger the request is almost comically extravagant; I am well aware of this, and I would add at once, if there be any one present who has heard enough, if there be one among the party who recoils from a dangerous confidence, and a piece of quixotic devotion to be known to whom—here is my hand ready, and I shall wish him good night and God speed with all the sincerity in the world."

A very tall, black man, with a heavy stool, immediately responded to this appeal.

"I commend your frankness, sir," said he, "and, for my part, I go. I make no reflections, but I cannot deny that you fill me with suspicious thoughts. I go myself, as I say, and perhaps you will think I have no right to add words to my example."

"On the contrary," replied Mr. Morris, "I am obliged to pay for all you say. It would be impossible to exaggerate the gravity of my proposal."

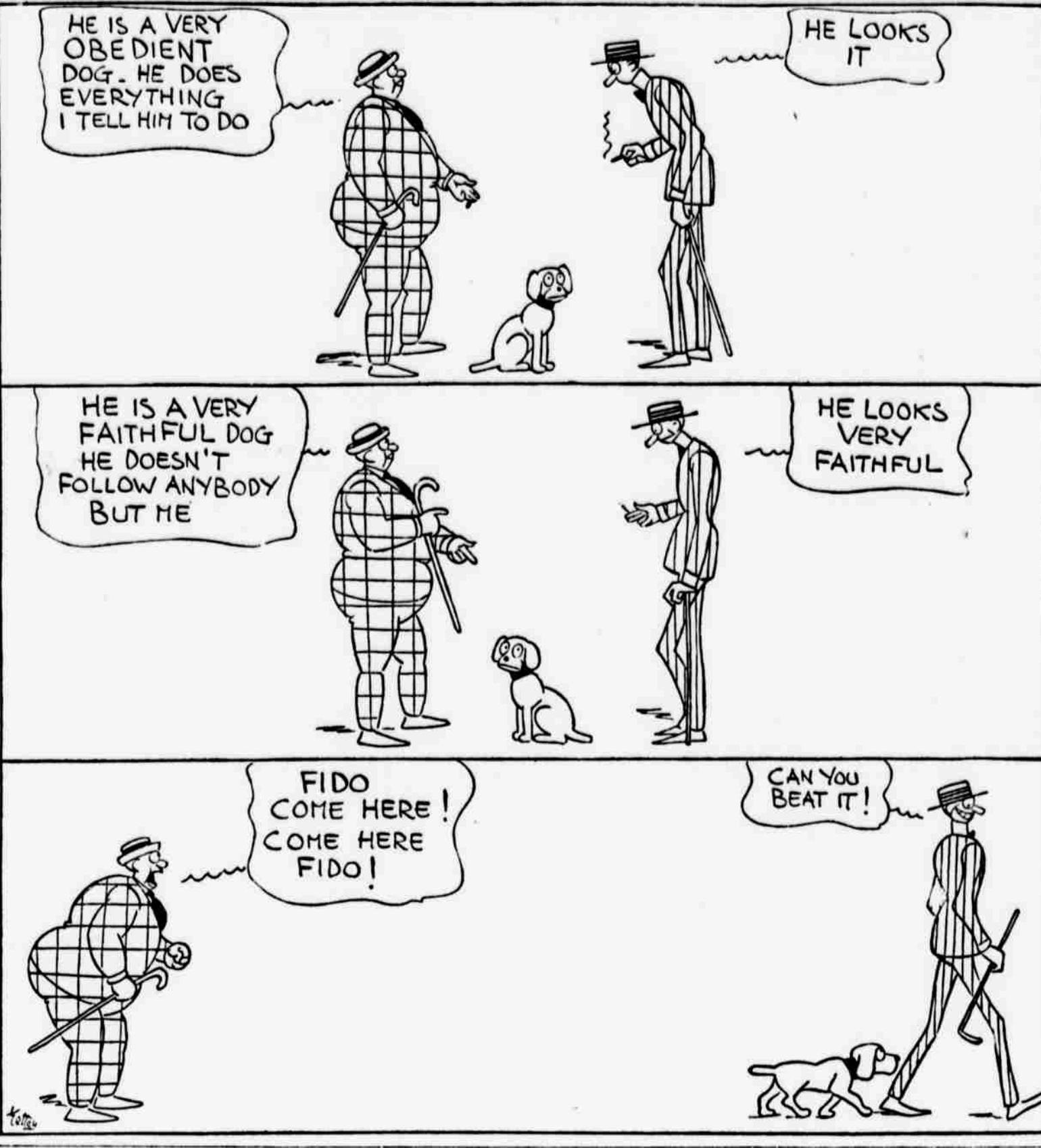
"Well, gentlemen, what do you say?" said the tall man, addressing the others. "We have had our evening's frolic; shall we all go homeward peaceably in a body? You will think well of my suggestion in the morning, when you see the sun again in innocence and safety."

The speaker pronounced the last words with an intonation which added to their force, and his face wore a singular expression, full of

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By Maurice Ketten



gravity and significance. Another of the company rose hastily, and, with some appearance of alarm, prepared to take his leave. There were only two who held their ground, Brackenbury and an old, red-nosed cavalry major, but these two preserved a nonchalant demeanor, and, beyond a look of intelligence which they rapidly exchanged, appeared entirely foreign to the discussion that had just been terminated.

Mr. Morris conducted the deserters as far as the door, which he closed upon their heels; then he turned round, disclosing a countenance of mingled relief and animation, and addressed the two officers as follows:

"I have chosen my men like Joshua in the Bible," said Mr. Morris, "and I now believe I have the pick of London. Your appearance pleased my hansom cabman; then I delighted me; I have watched your behavior in a strange company, and under the most unusual circumstances; I have studied how you played and how you bore your losses; lastly, I have put you to the test of a staggering announcement, and you reacted like an invitation to dinner. It is not for nothing," he cried, "that I have been for years the companion and the pupil of the bravest and wisest potentate in Europe."

"At the affair of Runderchang," observed the major, "I asked for twelve volunteers, and every trooper in the ranks replied to my appeal. But a gaming party is not the same thing as a regiment under fire. You may be pleased, I suppose, to have found two, and two who will not fail you at a pinch. As for the pair who ran away, I count them among the most pitiful bounds I ever met with. Lieut. Rich," he added, addressing Brackenbury, "I have heard much of you of late, and I can not doubt but you have also heard of me. I am Major O'Rourke."

And the veteran tendered his hand, which was red and tremulous, to the young lieutenant.

"Who has not?" answered Brackenbury.

"When this little matter is settled," said Mr. Morris, "you will think I have sufficiently rewarded you, for I could offer neither a more valuable service than to make him acquainted with the other."

"And now," said Major O'Rourke, "is it a duel?"

"A duel after a fashion," replied Mr. Morris, "I go myself, as I say, and perhaps you will think I have no right to add words to my example."

yourselves. Three days ago the person of whom I speak disappeared suddenly from home and until this morning I received no hint of his situation. You will fancy my alarm when I tell you that he is engaged upon a work of private justice. Bound by an unhappy oath, too lightly sworn, he finds it necessary, without the help of law, to rid the earth of an insidious and bloody villain. Already two of our friends, and one of them my own born brother, have perished in the enterprise. He himself, or I am much deceived, is taken in the same fatal toils. But at least he still lives and still hopes, as this billet sufficiently proves."

And the speaker, no other than Col. Geraldine, proffered a letter, thus conceived.

"Major Hammersmith: On Wednesday at 3 A. M. you will be admitted by the small door to the gardens of Rochester House, Regent's Park, by a man who is entirely in my interest. I must request you not to fail me by a second. Pray bring my case of swords, and, if you can find them, one or two gentlemen of conduct and discretion to whom my person is unknown. My name must not be used in this affair. T. GODALL."

"From his wisdom alone, if he had no other title," pursued Col. Geraldine, when the others had each satisfied his curiosity, "my friend is a man whose directions should implicitly be followed. I need not tell you, therefore, that I have not so much as visited the neighborhood of Rochester House, and that I am still as wholly in the dark as either of yourselves as to the nature of my friend's dilemma. I betook myself, as soon as I had received this order, to a furnishing contractor, and, in a few hours, the house in which we are had assumed its late air of festivity. My scheme was at least original, and I am far from regretting an action which has procured me the services of Major O'Rourke and Lieut. Brackenbury."

But the residents in the street which was a strange awakening. The house which this evening was full of lights and visitors they will find uninhabited and for sale to-morrow morning. Thus even the most serious concerns," added the colonel, "have a merry side."

"And let us add a merry ending," said Brackenbury.

The colonel consulted his watch.

"It is now hard on two," he said. "We have an hour before us, and a swift cab is at the door. Tell me if I may count upon your help."

"During a long life," replied Major O'Rourke, "I never took back my hand from anything, nor so much as hedged a bet."

Brackenbury signified his readiness in the most becoming terms, and after they had drunk a glass or two of wine the colonel gave each of them

a loaded revolver, and the three then mounted into the cab and drove off for the address in question.

Rochester House was a magnificent residence on the banks of the canal. The large extent of the garden isolated it in an unusual degree from the annoyances of the neighborhood. It seemed the paroxysm of some great nobleman or millionaire. As far as could be seen from the street there was not a glimmer of light in any of the numerous windows of the mansion, and the place had a look of neglect, as though the master had long been from home.

The cab was discharged and the three gentlemen were not long in discovering the small door, which was a sort of postern in a lane between two garden walls. It still wanted ten or fifteen minutes of the appointed time; the rain fell heavily and the adventurers sheltered themselves below some pendant ivy and spoke in low tones of the approaching trial.

Suddenly Geraldine raised his finger to command silence and all three bent their hearing to the utmost. Through the continuous noise of the rain the steps and voices of two men became audible from the other side of the wall, and, as they drew nearer Brackenbury, whose sense of hearing was remarkably acute, could even distinguish some fragments of their talk.

"Is the grave dug?" asked one.

"It is," replied the other; "behind the laurel hedge. When the job is done we can cover it with a pile of stakes."

The first speaker laughed and the sound of his merriment was shocking to the listeners on the other side.

"In an hour from now," he said.

And by the sound of the steps it was obvious that the pair had separated, and were proceeding in contrary directions.

Almost immediately after the postern door was cautiously opened, a white face was protruded into the lane, and a hand was seen beckoning the watchers. In dead silence the three passed the door, which was immediately locked behind them, and followed their guide through several garden alleys to the kitchen entrance of the house. A single candle burned in the great paved kitchen, which was destitute of the customary furniture, and as the party proceeded to ascend from thence by a flight of winding stairs, a prodigious noise of rattles testified still more plainly to the dilapidation of the house.

Their conductor preceded them, carrying the candle. He was a lean man, much bent, but still agile, and he turned from time to time and admonished silence and caution by his gestures. Col. Geraldine followed on his heels, the case of swords under one arm, and a pistol ready in the other. Brackenbury's heart beat thickly. He perceived that they were still in time, but he judged from the

alacrity of the old man that the hour of action must be near at hand, and the circumstances of this adventure were so obscure and menacing, the place seemed so well chosen for the darkest acts, that an older man than Brackenbury might have been pardoned a measure of emotion as he closed the procession up the winding stairs.

Prince Florizel Again.

At the top the guide threw open a door and ushered the three officers before him into a small apartment, lighted by a smoky lamp and the glow of a modest fire. At the chimney corner sat a man in the early prime of life and of a stout but courtly and commanding appearance. His attitude and expression were those of the most unmoved composure; he was smoking a cheroot with much enjoyment and deliberation, and on a table by his elbow stood a long glass of some effervescent beverage which diffused an agreeable odor through the room.

"Welcome," said he, extending his hand to Col. Geraldine. "I knew I might count on your exertions."

"On my devotion," replied the colonel, with a bow.

"Present me to your friends," continued the first, and, when that ceremony had been performed, "I wish, gentlemen," he added, with the most exquisite cordiality, "that I could offer you a more cheerful programme; it is ungracious to inaugurate an acquaintance upon serious affairs; but the compulsion of events is stronger than the obligation of good fellowship. I hope and believe you will be able to forgive me this unpleasant evening, and for men of your stamp, it will be enough to know that you are conferring a considerable favor."

"Your highness," said the major, "must pardon my bluntness. I am unable to hide what I know. For some time back I have suspected Major Hammersmith, but Mr. Godall is unmistakable. To seek two men in London unacquainted with Prince Florizel of Bohemia was to ask too much of Fortune's hands."

"Prince Florizel!" cried Brackenbury in amazement.

And he gazed with the deepest interest on the features of the celebrated personage before him.

"I shall not lament the loss of my incognito," remarked the Prince, "for it enables me to thank you with the more authority. You would have done as much for Mr. Godall, I feel sure, as for the Prince of Bohemia, but the latter can perhaps do more for you. The gain is mine," he added, with a courteous gesture.

And the next moment he was conversing with the two officers about the Indian army, and the native troops—a subject on which, as on all

If you thought you'd killed a man, but found you hadn't. If you hadn't committed a robbery, but found yourself accused of it—YOU'D BE LIKE THE HERO OF

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others, he had a remarkable fund of information and the soundest views.

There was something so striking in this man's attitude at a moment of deadly peril that Brackenbury was overcome with respectful admiration; nor was he less sensible to the charm of his conversation or the surprising amenity of his address. Every gesture, every intonation, was not only noble in itself, but seemed to ennoble the fortunate mortal for whom it was intended, and Brackenbury confessed to himself with enthusiasm that this was a sovereign for whom a brave man might thankfully lay down his life.

Many minutes had thus passed when the person who had introduced them into the house, and who had sat ever since in a corner, and with his watch in his hand, arose and whispered a word into the Prince's ear.

"It is well," Mr. Noel replied, "Florizel, stand, and then addressing the others, 'You will excuse me, gentlemen,' he added, 'If I have to leave you in the dark. The moment now approaches.'"

Dr. Noel extinguished the lamp. A faint, gray light, preliminary of the dawn, illuminated the windows, but not so much as to illumine the room, and when the prince rose to his feet it was impossible to distinguish his features or to make a guess at the nature of the emotion which obviously affected him as he spoke. He moved toward the door and placed himself at one side of it in an attitude of the warriest attention.

"You will have the kindness," he said, "to maintain the strictest silence and to conceal yourselves in the denest of the shadows."

The three officers and the physician hastened to obey, and for nearly ten minutes the only sound in Rochester House was occasioned by the excursions of the rats behind the woodwork. The prince, however, did not break of a huge broke in with surprising distinctness on the silence, and shortly after the watchers could distinguish a slow and cautious tread approaching up the kitchen stairs. At every second step the intruder seemed to pause and lend an ear, and during these intervals, which seemed of an incalculable duration, a profound silence possessed the spirit of the listeners. Dr. Noel, accustomed as he was to dangerous emotions, suffered an almost painful prostration; his breath whistled in his lungs, his teeth grated one upon another and his joints cracked aloud as he nervously shifted his position.

At last a hand was laid upon the door, and a bolt shot back with a slight report. There followed another pause, during which Brackenbury could see the pale and anxious features of the prince and follow together noiselessly as if for some unusual exertion.

The President Trapped.

When the door opened, letting in a little more of the light of the morning, and the figure of a man appeared upon the threshold and stood motionless. He was tall and carried a knife in his hand. Even in the twilight they could see his upper teeth bare and glistening, for his mouth was open like that of a bound animal to leap. The man had evidently stood there the drops kept falling from his wet clothes and pattered on the floor.

The next moment he crossed the threshold. There was a leap, a swift cry, an instantaneous struggle, and before Col. Geraldine could spring to his aid the Prince held the man, disarmed, by the throat and by the wrist.

"Dr. Noel," he said, "you will be so good as to relight the lamp."

And relinquishing the charge of his prisoner to Geraldine and Brackenbury, he crossed the room and set his back against the chimney piece. As soon as the lamp had kindled, the party beheld an unaccounted sternness on the Prince's features; he was no longer Florizel, the careless gentleman; it was the Prince of Bohemia, justly incensed and full of purpose, who was raising his head and addressing the captive president of the Suicide Club.

"President," he said, "you have laid your hand on me, and your own feet are under me. It is your last morning. You have just sworn the Regent's Canal. It is your last bath in this world. Your old accomplice, Dr. Noel, so far from betraying me, has delivered you into my hands for judgment. And the grave you had dug for me this afternoon shall serve, in God's almighty providence, to hide your own just doom from the curiosity of mankind. Kneel and pray, sir, if you have a mind that way; for your time is now at an end, and God is weary of your iniquities."

The president made no answer either by word or sign, but continued to gaze at the Prince with a look on his face as though he were conscious of the Prince's pronounced and unsparring regard.

"Gentlemen," continued Florizel, regarding the unhappy fate of his conversation, "this is a fellow who has long eluded me, but whom, thanks to Dr. Noel, I now have tightly by the heels. To tell the story of his misdeeds would occupy more time than we can now afford; but if the candle had contained nothing but the blood of his victims, I believe the wretch could have been no drier than you see him. Even in an affair of this sort I desire to preserve the forms of honor. But I make you the judges, gentlemen—this is more an execution than a duel, and to give the rogue his choice of weapons would be to push too far a point of etiquette. I cannot afford to lose my life in such a business," he continued, undisturbed by the case of swords, "and as a pistol bullet travels so often on the wings of chance, and skill and courage may

fall by the most trembling marksman, I have decided, and I feel sure you will approve of my determination, to wait this question to the touch of swords."

"Quick, sir," added Prince Florizel to the president, "choose a blade and do not keep me waiting; I have an impatience to be done with you forever."

For the first time since he was captured and disarmed the president raised his head, and it was plain that he began instantly to pluck up courage.

"Is it to be stand up?" he asked eagerly, "and between you and me?"

"I mean as far to honor you," replied the prince.

"Oh, come!" cried the president. "With a fair field, who knows how things may happen? I must add that I consider it handsome behavior on your highness's part, and if the worst comes to the worst I shall die by one of the most gallant gentlemen in Europe."

And the president, liberated by those who had detained him, stepped up to the table and began, with minute attention, to select a sword. He was highly elated and seemed to feel no doubt that he should issue victorious from the contest. The spectators grew alarmed in the face of so entire a confidence, and adjured Prince Florizel to reconsider his intention.

"It is but a farce," he answered, "and I think I can promise you, gentlemen, and it will not be long before I shall have my revenge."

"Your highness will be careful not to overreach," said Col. Geraldine. "Gentlemen," returned the prince, "do you ever know me fail in a debt of honor? I shall not fail in this transaction. Major O'Rourke, you are a man of some years and a settled reputation; I therefore recommend the president to your good graces. Lieut. Rich will be so good as to lend me his attention; a young man cannot have too much experience in such affairs."

"Your highness is standing your friend in more important circumstances than in this," said the prince, "and he will be so good as to follow me to the apartment and down the kitchen stairs."

The two men, who were thus left alone, threw open the window and leaned out, straining every sense to catch an indication of the tragical events that were about to follow. The rain was now over; day had almost come and the birds were piping in the shrubbery and on the forest trees of the garden. The prince and his companions were visible for a moment as they followed an alley between two flowering thickets, but at the first corner a clump of grass intervened, and they were again concealed from view. This was all that the colonel and the physician had an opportunity to see, as the garden was so close to the house that it was evidently so remote from the house that not even the noise of sword play reached their ears.

"It has been," he said, "him toward the grave," and Dr. Noel with a shudder.

"God," cried the colonel, "God defend the right!"

And they awaited the event in silence, the doctor shaking with fear, the colonel in an agony of sweat. Many minutes must have elapsed, the day was sensibly broader and the shrubbery was more visible; but in the garden before a sound of returning footsteps recalled their glances toward the door. It was the prince and the doctor, who were evidently so remote from the house that not even the noise of sword play reached their ears.

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THE END